

IN PRAISE OF



Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

SHADOWS

We Orientals seek our satisfactions in whatever surroundings we happen to find ourselves, to content ourselves with things as they are, and so darkness causes us no discontent, we resign ourselves to it as inevitable. If light is scarce then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty. But the progressive Westerner is determined always to better his lot. From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light — his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even the minutest shadow.

darkness

darkness

shadow.

Chapters

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Devoid of Shadows

Andres Jaque
2011

In most recent Western-style buildings, the ceilings are so low that one feels as if balls of fire were blazing directly above one's head. . . One of these balls of fire alone would suffice to light the place, yet three or four blaze down from the ceiling, and there are smaller versions on the walls and pillars, serving no function but to eradicate every trace of shadow. And so the room is devoid of shadows.

Light is used not for reading and writing or sewing but for dispelling the shadows in the farthest corners, and this runs against the basic idea of the Japanese room.

Bright Lights

Magi© Bullet
1992



Were It Not for Shadows, There Would Be No Beauty

Felix Gonzalez-Torres
1992



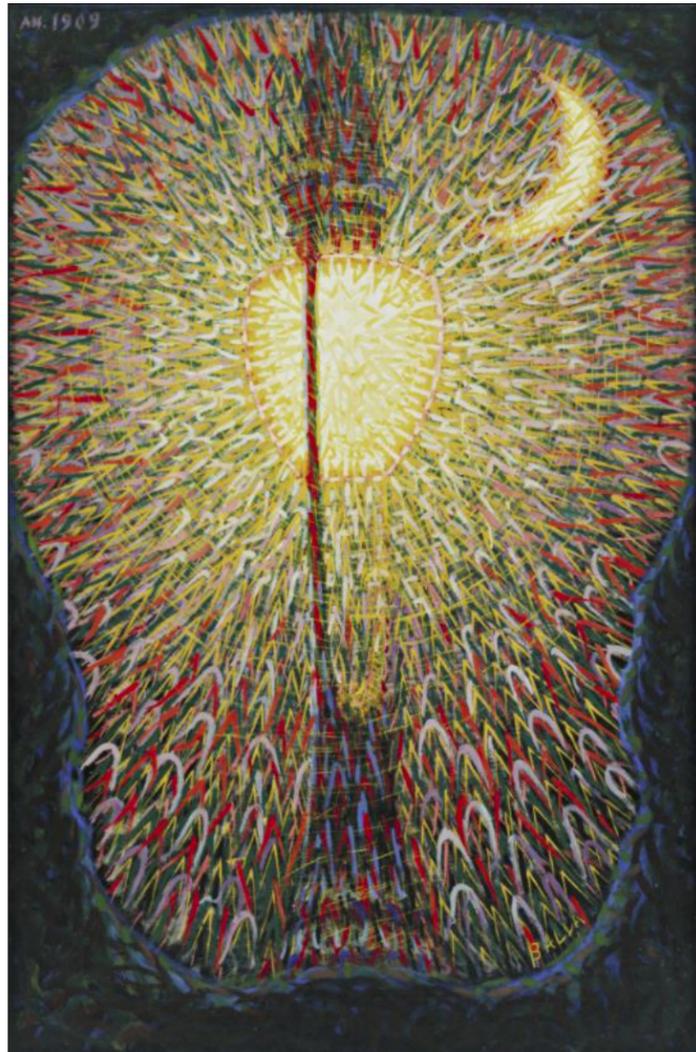
Jewel

I suppose it is hard for those who praise the fleshly beauty we see under today's bright lights to imagine the ghostly beauty of those older women. And there may be some who argue that if beauty has to hide its weak points in the dark it is not beauty at all. But we Orientals, as I have suggested before, create a kind of beauty of the shadows we have made in out-of-the-way places. There is an old song that says "the brushwood we gather—stack it together, it makes a hut; pull it apart, a field once more." Such is our way of thinking—we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.

A phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and color in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.

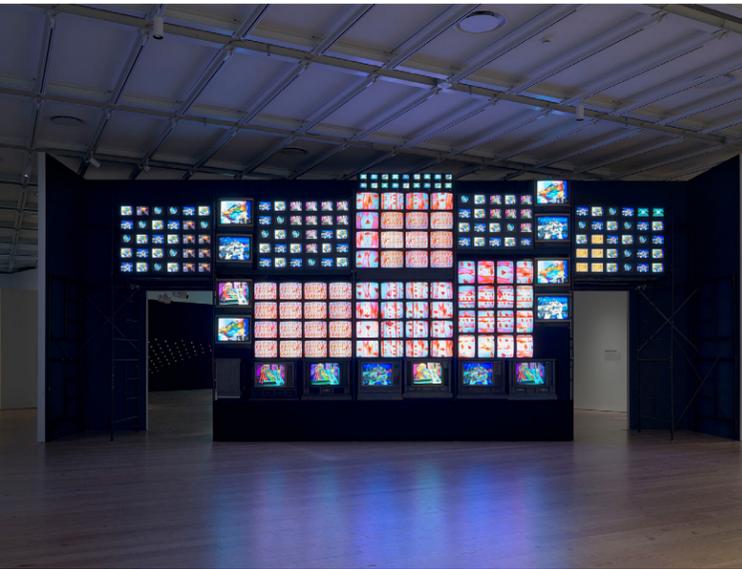
When the Luster Has Worn Off

Giacomo Balla
1910-11



Japanese paper gives us a certain feeling of warmth, of calm and repose. Western paper turns away the light, while our paper seems to take it in, to envelop it gently, like the soft surface of a first snowfall. It gives off no sound when it is crumpled or folded, it is quiet and pliant to the touch as the leaf of a tree.

As a general matter we find it hard to be really at home with things that shine and glitter. The Westerner uses silver and steel and nickel tableware, and polishes it to a fine brilliance, but we object to the practice. While we do sometimes indeed use silver for teakettles, decanters, or sake cups, we prefer not to polish it. On the contrary, we begin to enjoy it only when the luster has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina. Almost every householder has had to scold an insensitive maid who has polished away the tarnish so patiently waited for.



A Music of Reticence, of Atmosphere

Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art
1965–2018



Most important of All are the Pauses

Nam June Paik
1993

Had we invented the phonograph and the radio, how much more faithfully they would reproduce the special character of our voices and our music. Japanese music is above all a music of reticence, of atmosphere. When recorded, or amplified by a loudspeaker, the greater part of its charm is lost. In conversation, too, we prefer the soft voice, the understatement. Most important of all are the pauses. Yet the phonograph and radio render these moments of silence lifeless.

Grime



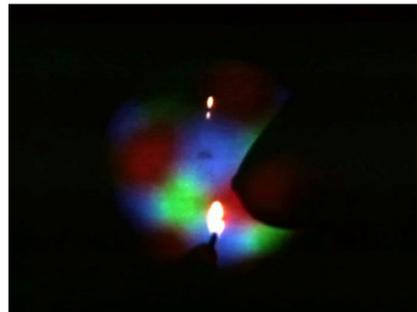
Expose Every Speck of Grime

Olafur Eliasson
2004

In both Chinese and Japanese the words denoting this glow describe a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling—which is to say grime. If indeed “elegance is frigid,” it can as well be described as filthy. There is no denying, at any rate, that among the elements of the elegance in which we take such delight is a measure of the unclean, the unsanitary.

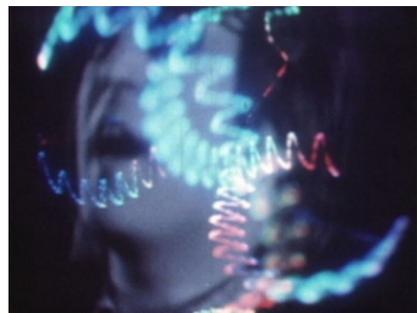
I suppose I shall sound terribly defensive if I say that Westerners attempt to expose every speck of grime and eradicate it, while we Orientals carefully preserve and even idealize it. Yet for better or for worse we do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them. Living in these old houses among these old objects is in some mysterious way a source of peace and repose.

Liquid



Dark Depths of the Bowl

Nam June Paik, Jud Yalkut
1966-1972, 1992



**What Lies Within the Darkness
One Cannot Distinguish**

Nam June Paik, Jud Yalkut
1966-1972, 1992



A Moment of Trance

Nam June Paik, Jud Yalkut
1965-1971, 1992

I know few greater pleasures than holding a lacquer soul bowl in my hands, feeling upon my palms the weight of the liquid and its mild warmth. The sensation is something like that of holding a plump newborn baby... With lacquerware there is a beauty in that moment between removing the lid and lifting the bowl to the mouth when one gazes at the still, silent liquid in the dark depths of the bowl, its color hardly different from that of the bowl itself. What lies within the darkness one cannot distinguish, but the palm senses the gentle movements of the liquid, vapor rises from within forming droplets on the rim, and the fragrance carried upon the vapor brings a delicate anticipation. What a world of difference there is between this moment and the moment when soup is served Western style, in a pal, shallow bowl. A moment of mystery, it might almost be called, a moment of trance.

Yokan



**The Faint,
Dreamlike Glow**

Bruce Nauman
1983



Western Candies

Keith Sonnier
1969 (Fabricated 1986)

**An Object for
Meditation**

Dan Flavin
1968



It has been said of Japanese food that it is a cuisine to be looked at rather than eaten. I would go further and say that it is to be meditated upon, a kind of silent music evoked by the combination of lacquerware and the light of a candle flickering in the dark. Natsume Sōseki, in *Pillow of Grass*, praises the color of the confection *yōkan*; it is not indeed a color to call forth meditation? The cloudly translucence, like that of jade; the faint, dreamlike glow that suffuses it, as if it had drunk into its very depths the light of the sun; the complexity and profundity of the color—nothing of the sort is to be found in Western candies. How simple and insignificant cream-filled chocolates seem by comparison. And when *yōkan* is served in a lacquer dish within whose dark recesses its color is scarcely distinguishable, then it is most certainly an object for meditation.

With Japanese food, a brightly lighted room and shining tableware cut the appetite in half. Our cooking depends upon shadows and is inseparable from darkness.



Heavy
Shadows
Against
Light
Shadows

James Turrell
1994

Room

The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's ends.

And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows—it has nothing else. Westerners are amazed at the simplicity of Japanese rooms, perceiving in them no more than ashen walls bereft of ornament. Their reaction is understandable, but it betrays a failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows. Out beyond the sitting room, which the rays of the sun can at best but barely reach, we extend the eaves or build on a veranda, putting the sunlight at still greater a remove. The light from the garden steals in but dimly through paper-paneled doors, and it is precisely this indirect light that makes for us the charm of a room.

I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved. I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing. In the mansion called literature I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly, I would strip away the useless decoration. . . Perhaps we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them.

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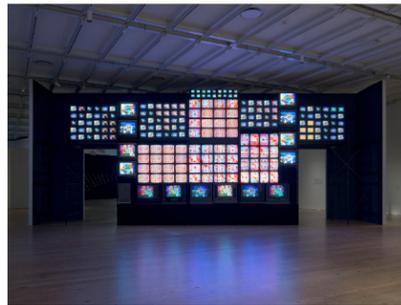
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